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SUBJECT: BULGARIA: NEXT STEPS ON AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN

SOFIA 00000089 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY AMB MCELDOWNEY FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

REF: STATE 15623, STATE 15959, SOFIA 44, SOFIA 452,
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¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Recognizing the strategic challenge that Afghanistan presents - for the Alliance and for the region Q the Bulgarian government is looking to increase its commitments on troop levels and civilian support. As one of the principal transit routes for Afghan heroine, the Bulgarians are also hoping to expand cooperation on counter-narcotics. As Defense Minister Tsonev told Secretary Gates in their February 4 meeting, Bulgaria is planning to deploy additional OMLTs and a medical team and is considering ways to provide helicopters. Foreign Minister Kalfin will use a pull aside with Secretary Clinton at the March 5 NATO Ministerial to discuss additional training for Afghan civilians, especially in the areas of agriculture and engineering. The Bulgarian General Staff has also offered to discuss ways that joint bases here might be used to address US and Alliance needs, in the event that the Manas base in Kyrgyzstan becomes unavailable. Facing general elections this summer, the politics - and pricing - of additional commitments will not be insignificant issues but they should prove manageable. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Bulgarian leaders "get it" on Afghanistan, understanding fully that it is the central challenge facing NATO. Prior to receipt of reftels A and B, the Ambassador had extensive discussions with the Prime Minister, President, Defense Minister and Foreign Minister on increasing Bulgarian engagement. While the GOB has not made a final decision, they are looking for ways to do more.

MILITARY ASSISTANCE: FOCUSED IN KANDAHAR

¶3. (C) Bulgaria has 467 soldiers in Afghanistan (up from 80 in 2006). Most are in Kandahar guarding the perimeter of Kandahar Airfield, while the remainder are embedded in international military, medical or PRT contingents in Kabul, Herat and Pol-e Khomri. In February 2009, Bulgaria will deploy to Kandahar its first Operational Mentor and Liaison Team (OMLT), in cooperation with the Tennessee National Guard. Bulgaria has also donated weapons, ammunition and equipment to the Afghan Army. We have engaged the

Bulgarians repeatedly on adding more OMLTs and a Role Two medical facility. The government is inclined to do so, but has not committed. The Bulgarians are also serious about providing helicopters to ISAF, including pilots and crews, but talks with NATO on necessary refurbishments and upgrades have not yet produced results.

CIVILIAN ASSISTANCE: ROOM FOR GROWTH

¶4. (C) The Foreign Minister and President's Chief of Staff expressed interest in expanding civilian cooperation in Afghanistan as a complement to military participation, but look to us for ideas. In 2008, Bulgaria signed an agreement to train a dozen Afghani diplomats per year in Sofia. We believe this type of program could be extended to other fields and/or Bulgaria could support development in Afghanistan through engineering, medical or agricultural teams. In response to demarche (reftels A and B), Deputy Foreign Minister covering Afghanistan indicated readiness to provide civilian training either in Bulgaria or in Afghanistan. Bulgaria previously provided 70 personnel for Air Traffic Control at Kabul International Airport.

¶5. (C) Counter-narcotics programs are an area of great interest to the Bulgarians, as the largest-ever heroine seizure in Europe (approximately 450 kgs from Afghanistan) was recorded in December 2008 at the Black Sea port of Burgas. Bulgaria has limited expertise to provide to Afghanistan in this regard, but it does have a strong law-enforcement relationship with our regional DEA office, which could be expanded to promote Bulgarian cooperation with Turkey, Macedonia, and Serbia. (See reftels D and E.)

EFFECTIVE IN THE FIELD, BUT NOT FULLY UTILIZED

¶6. (C) American and allied commanders have praised the skill and professionalism of Bulgarian soldiers in

SOFIA 00000089 002.2 OF 002

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Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo and Bosnia. Bulgarian soldiers are capable, and in many instances, may be under-utilized (e.g., Special Forces personnel assigned to perimeter security missions, etc.) Bulgaria retains a pool of deployable forces, many with prior experience in overseas operations. As a rule, Bulgarian soldiers are eager to participate in foreign deployments and the General Staff always has more volunteers than slots to fill.

¶7. (C) While Bulgaria possesses capable forces, its soldiers have very little experience leading operations, and its political leadership remains leery of sending troops into combat situations. The first Bulgarian OMLT (in cooperation with Tennessee National Guard) will be U.S.-led, but future rotations will be Bulgarian-led. The plan is to ease the Bulgarians into a leadership role and get them comfortable operating "outside the wire." Longer term, our recommendation to Bulgaria is to consolidate its troops (now spread across three regional commands) to a single area and add additional troops to form a battalion-sized force. The Bulgarian leadership is interested in this idea, though they have asked for U.S. training and equipment support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

¶8. (C) Lack of money and equipment are the greatest impediments to further Bulgarian contributions. But the withdrawal of Bulgaria's 153-soldier contingent from Iraq in December 2008 has created an opportunity to transfer resources to Afghanistan. We see the following as within Bulgaria's capacity:

- Bulgaria deploys 2 or 3 additional OMLTs in late 2009.

- Bulgaria deploys a Role Two Military Medical team in 2009 as recommended in the CJSOR.
- Bulgaria either allows NATO to refurbish its MI-17 helos at a reasonable cost, or offers to deploy its newer Cougar helicopters.
- Bulgaria begins planning for a long-term consolidation of its forces to reduce command and control problems and allow Bulgarian contingents to take on more ambitious roles.
- Bulgaria agrees to new civilian training programs in agriculture, engineering or medicine; and extends counter-narcotics cooperation to include its neighbors, especially Turkey, Macedonia and Serbia.

¶9. (C) Comment: The Bulgarian government will be reluctant to announce any new large commitments prior to the elections this summer. But they are interested in discussing future options with us now, so that training and logistics can begin to move and a new formal package of Afghanistan assistance executed by year's end. The government will likely respond positively to a specific, targeted request, but it is important they hear a coordinated message from the U.S. and NATO.

MCELDOWNEY